

# THE STUDENTS' ABILITY AND PROBLEMS IN WRITING A DESCRIPTIVE ESSAY ACROSS DIFFERENT LEVELS ( A Case Study in One University in Karawang)

**Fikri Asih Wigati**

[fikriasih.wigati@yahoo.com](mailto:fikriasih.wigati@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:** writing has now turned out to be an essential device for people to live in today's global community. However, the Indonesian students' academic writings are still not satisfying (Alwasilah, 2001: 15; Mukminatien, 1997: 2; Yuhardi, 2009). Particularly in a class comprising many proficiency levels, students often find problems in essay writing. This study addresses the question of the ability and problems of the students who are at the English language proficiency of basic and upper-intermediate levels in writing a descriptive essay. The participants in this study were six students who enrolled in writing IV class in the fourth semester of English Education Program in a university in Karawang. The data were collected by way of various techniques i.e. classroom observations, analysis of the products, and interviews with the writers. The data were later codified and juxtaposed in order to reveal the students' technical ability and problems in writing (content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics). The findings show that the respondents who are at the basic level of language proficiency tended to have more problems. They were faced mainly with the lack of vocabulary and the lack of capability in operating the English grammar. These respondents also had mechanical problems. The upper-intermediate students tended to have more understanding of the writing aspects, nevertheless, they had problems such as composing unclear introductory paragraph, problematic complex sentences, and making grammatical slips. The findings of the present study provide some recommendations for the next researchers who wish to investigate the same field and also for teachers and students to improve the teaching learning process especially writing a descriptive essay.

**Keywords:** *descriptive essay; writing ability and problems; writing aspects*

## Introduction

The ability to write can allow people to communicate and to transform knowledge although they come from different background and cultures. Consequently, possessing writing skill is undeniably an obligation (Weigle, 2009). Unfortunately, it is often found that the students' writings are still not satisfying (Alwasilah, 2001: 15; Mukminatien, 1997: 2; Yuhardi, 2009). The students' problems and the unsatisfactory writing products indicate that writing skill is a complicated skill to acquire. Besides Silva (1993) in Weigle (2009: 36) also states that the second language writing process tends to be more constrained, more complex, and less efficient than the process of writing in the first language. As a result, teachers should be aware that second-language writers often face difficulties. This awareness means that teachers should see the students' writing difficulties as evidence of a struggle to control the conventions of a new target community rather than as the personal failings (Hyland, 2009: 78).

Considering the students' ability and difficulties in the writing process is particularly important when teaching EFL students in a class with multi level language skills since it is often difficult to ensure that all the students learn in the same intensity of understanding. Some students who are at the beginner level often suffer from difficulties and failure in learning. They need more time in the learning process. This is in line with the idea stated by Brown (2001) that teaching the beginner is considered as the most challenging level of language instruction because the students at this level have little knowledge of the target language. On the contrary, there are also advanced level students who leave the mates behind. The advanced level students tend to have greater degree of accuracy and fluency in English. In this case, the teachers' task is to assist these advanced students in their attempt to automate the language (Brown, 2001: 110). Therefore, the main focus of this study is to identify the students' ability and problems across the different language skill levels in writing a descriptive essay.

Writing is never a one-step action, it means that when the writers write, they do more than just putting words together to make sentences. They go through several steps to produce a piece of writing (Oshima & Hogue, 2006; Oshima & Hogue, 2007; Grabe and Kaplan, 1996; Zemach and Rumisek, 2009). Regarding the descriptive essay, descriptive text is one of the written texts that has social function to describe a set of feature of a particular person, place, thing or phenomenon (Feez and Joyce, 1998: 120; Gerot and Wignel, 1995: 208; Knapp and Watkins, 2005: 97; Zemach and Rumisek, 2005: 25). It is one of most widely used types across all of the learning areas (Knapp and Watkins, 2005: 97). A descriptive text has two stages in its structure: the Identification Stage and the Description Stage (Feez and Joyce, 1998: 120; Gerot and Wignel, 1995: 208).

Brown (2001:356) mentions that the evaluation of students' writing performance, especially in a process-oriented writing class, can be alienated into five aspects which include content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanic. Content deals with the writer's detailed knowledge of the topic presented which is covering the substance and the relevance of topic organization. A good content is shown by some indicators. *First*, the content is complete, detail, and relevant to the assigned topic. *Second*, it also includes all important ideas and demonstrates an understanding about the topic. *Third*, it is fully developed and includes specific facts and examples. *Fourth*, it shows the effectiveness of the essay structure i.e. introduction and supporting ideas. The introduction should orient the readers to the main idea, whereas, the supporting ideas should be provided in relevant way. (Brown, 2001; Oshima and Hogue, 1999, Oshima and Hogue 2007; Weigle, 2009). While, good organization in writing is related to the use of proper writing organization which represents the whole writing structure construction (Weigle, 2009). The introductory paragraph has clear classification of what the text is going to describe. Subsequently, each paragraph of the body discusses a new point and begins with a clear topic sentence. Each paragraph also has specific supporting materials. The writing organization can also be assessed through its coherence. For coherence in writing, the sentences in the essay must hold together. The movement of the sentences in the essay must hold together. (Oshima&Hogue, 2006:21). This coherence can be achieved through repeating key nouns, using consistent pronouns, using transition signals to link ideas, and arranging the idea in logical order. The third aspect is vocabulary, this writing aspect refers to the students' ability in considering the word choice to express their ideas effectively. The vocabulary can be assessed through the appropriate word choice and usage; and its adequacies for the intended communication (Weigle, 2009). The fourth aspect is grammar. In the academic world, the opposition between slips and errors is important. Slips reflect occasional lapses in speaking or writing performance which can be caused by memory lapses, physical states, such as tiredness and psychological conditions such as strong emotion (Bot, 2005:127). However, he or she actually knows what the correct one is. Whereas, errors in writing reflect gaps in a learner's knowledge; they occur because the student does not know what the correct one is (Ellis, 1997:17-19, Bot, 2005:127). The last is mechanics. This writing aspect is related to the concern of writing application which includes the use of the correct capitalization, punctuation and spelling, the citation of references (if applicable), and the neatness (Platt and Platt, 1992 in Hartono, 2001 in Yuhardi, 2009: 100; Weigle, 2009:116).

## Research Methodology

This qualitative study investigated the students' writing ability and problems when they were writing the descriptive essay. Since this is a case study design, so the samples were purposively selected.

Participating in this study were six students who enrolled in writing IV class in the fourth semester. Those sixth students were purposively selected through three considerations. The first concern was based on the result of the *Basic English Skill* test that was administered in the research site on the year of 2012. Because of the complexities of both writing as process and as product and to ensure the clarity of the students' abilities and problem across language proficiency levels, a decision was made to contrast high achieving students' ability and problems and low achieving students' ability and problems in the essay writing. Second, the purposive participants were also chosen based on their academic performance in the previous semester and a writing test.

As a result, the composition of the purposive participants as the samples of the study was three students who were at the basic level (R#1, R#2, R#3) and three students who were at the upper-intermediate level (R#4, R#5, R#6).

This study employed three techniques in collecting data namely observation, documentation, and interview. Then, the data interpretation and on-going data analysis were done from the classroom observations, students' written text, and interviews.

## Result and Discussion

### 1. Content

All of the writing products produced by the basic level respondents are relevant to the assigned task which asked the students to describe a place. However, related to the details of the texts, the text produced by the basic level respondents had lack of details and most of the important ideas needed by the readers do not exist in the texts. The descriptions are still too few. The details also cannot build the understanding of the texts' content. This statement definitely can be proven from the length of the texts. The average numbers of the words for each text is only about 100 words. The total sentences for each text are about nine until ten sentences. Another important thing that needs to be reported in this section is that the raters (the researcher and Mr. Haydar, pseudonym) had difficulty in understanding the content of the three texts since the vocabularies and the grammar applied are not comprehensible. Hence, the ideas of the basic level respondents cannot be digested deeply. The data interview and the data from the observation provide some explanations of the reasons why the respondents did not provide enough details. According to the respondents' answers, it is revealed that they had the difficulty in expressing their ideas in English. The problems were mainly on their lack of vocabulary and their lack of

capability in operating the English grammar. They consulted the dictionary about 6 until 7 times in one sentence making. This may lead to two impacts. *First*, the time that should be used to write was more taken up to consult the dictionary. *Second*, the ideas might be truncated due to the limited vocabulary. Problems in applying the correct grammar also became the big obstacle for the students in conveying their ideas. From the observation, it is also found that when all the students were given the time to compose the outline, R#1 (a basic level respondent) did not make it. She chose to compose the draft first in Indonesian language. In the time the lecturer gave the time to create the writing draft, she translated her Indonesian draft into English in order to avoid truncated ideas. This result of the study confirms the previous claims stated that poor writers typically exhibit difficulties in coping with grammar (Westwood, 2008; Bryne, 1988). Especially for those who learn English as a foreign language, the amount of language which they have for writing is often very limited so that it is frequently impossible to make any meaningful form of writing practice (Sylva, 1993 in Hayland, 2009). Therefore, it is necessary to simplify the writing tasks so that the tasks are more achievable for weaker writer (Saddler, 2006).

On the other hand, the writing products of the upper-intermediate level respondents have an adequate treatment of the topic by conveying variety of ideas that relevant to the topic. They also have accurate details that show some independent of interpretations of the topic. Nevertheless, the introductory paragraph of the text #4 has a circular style. The respondents did not give a general idea of the topic directly. It is probably affected by the Indonesian's style from which the culture usually does not come straight to the point. The culture of Indonesian writing style is circle and never looks at the subject directly (Kaplan, 1966 in Yuhardi 2009:61).

## 2. Organization

The organizations of the idea of the basic level respondents are not quite clear as those students did not apply the appropriate schematic structure that should be used for a descriptive essay namely classifying and description. The respondents did not classify clearly what the topic is. The basic level respondents tended to gave the description directly. On the other hand, the organizations of the idea of the upper-intermediate students are quite clear since they used the appropriate schematic structure. The upper-intermediate level respondents classified the topic afterward they gave description about it. With regard to the text's coherence, all of the respondents, basic and upper-intermediate students, tried to achieve coherence by repeating key nouns. However, with regard to the transition signals, there is a difference that distinguishes the basic level respondents' organization of the text and the upper-intermediate level respondents' text organization. The basic level respondents did not put the transitions signals for their texts. Consequently, the ideas are disconnected and do not flow smoothly since there is not enough guidance for the readers concerning the movement of one idea to the next. This may cause difficulty in the comprehension of most of the intended communication. On the contrary, all of the upper-intermediate level respondents' ideas flow smoothly since they gave sufficient transition signals in their text. In short, the organizations of the upper-intermediate respondents' texts are adequately controlled.

The results of this recent study confirm the previous claims mentioned that weaker writers' writing is less coherent than proficient writers' (Saddler, 2006). Saddler (2006) mentioned that weak writers spend little time to think and to plan in their writing; therefore the ideas are not presented in a good coherence. However, this study revealed that the inadequate vocabularies and the incapability in operating grammar also hampered the basic level respondents to produce good coherences. Their focus was how to deliver their ideas in English, not to generate good organizations of the text. This finding is verified by the following comment.

R#1: “ *Boro-boroMsmikiringimananyambunginsatukalimatsamakalimatlainnya, nyampeinsatukalimatajasusahnyamintaampun.*” (It is almost impossible to think about how to connect one sentence to other; even it is very hard for me to deliver a sentence in English).

## 3. Vocabulary

The wrong word choice and the incorrect usage are often found in the text #1, #2, and #3 which often caused the difficulties to comprehend the content of the texts. The lack of vocabulary was confessed by the three respondents as their biggest problem. It is evidenced by the statement from R#1 (the basic level student who wrote the text #1): “*Sayakesulitankalauharusmembuat essay karena vocabulary sayasangatkurang.*” (I felt difficult to write an essay because of my lack of vocabularies). From the observation data, it was also found that the three respondents were very dependent on the dictionary in composing their essay. About more than 65% of the words were taken from the dictionary. Hence, it can be concluded that the respondents who are at the basic level of English proficiency level had problems with limited vocabulary like lack of vocabularies and frequent mistakes in word/idiom choice and usage. Conversely, from the data taken from the upper-intermediate level students texts, it is found that there is no inadequacy in the vocabulary for the essay. From the findings it can be concluded that the limited vocabulary hindered the basic level respondents to express and to convey their ideas by writing. This is in line with the previous researches that EFL students often face problems in their writing process because of their lack of vocabulary (Silva, 1993 in Hayland, 2009; Yuhardi, 2009)

#### 4. Grammar

The students who are the representatives of the Basic Level of language proficiency students experienced lack of ability in operating the English grammar. Almost all of their sentences have sentence structure error, incorrect word order, incorrect subject-verb agreement, incorrect or missing article, and problem with singular or plural of a noun. On the other hand, the students who are at the upper-intermediate level of language proficiency tended to master the grammatical rules though they often had problems with the complex sentences. These findings support the previous claim stated that the lower level writers exhibit more difficulties at the level of grammar (Saddler, 2006). The lack of ability in operating the correct grammar has become the big obstacle for the basic-level respondents to convey their idea in English. Consequently, they found the task of writing is very difficult and this lack of competence resulted in minimum quality and quantity of the essay they produced.

#### 5. Mechanics

The basic level respondents had problems with capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. Almost of their sentences have errors in capitalization and punctuation. However, they had less error in spelling. The important thing should be highlighted is that all of the respondents were allowed to consult the dictionary in the writing process. Therefore, there is a tendency that those percentages will be much higher if they were not allowed to look up dictionary in the process of writing the essay since approximately 65% of the words written by the respondents were taken from the dictionary. On the contrary, the Upper-Intermediate Level did not have any problem with capitalization, punctuation, and spelling.

#### Conclusion and Suggestion

This study found that the basic level students had more problems with the details of the content and text organization. The problems were mainly caused by their lack of vocabulary and their lack of capability in operating the English grammar. These respondents also had problems in capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. Conversely, the respondents who are at the upper-intermediate level of language proficiency showed their ability in the aspects of writing such as content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. Nevertheless, they had problems with the style of the introductory paragraph. They also tend to have some slips in the grammar like sentence structure and article. For the class teachers, it is important to consider the characteristics and the levels of the English language proficiency of the students. Lower levels writers will still need a large amount of guidance and support to reach the progress in their writing. Teachers could also apply the collaborative writing method between more advanced students and the basic level students.

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